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Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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Budapest, 1944

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“I lived on this Earth at a time
When man became so low
That he murdered for pleasure, not just following commands.”
—Miklós Radnóti,
Hungarian poet, killed in 1944

I was eight years old when they took my mother. Just like that: two thugs in green shirts came with a list of young women, gave them ten minutes to dress, and herded them at a brick factory. From there they were taken by foot to a concentration camp in Austria. Along their 400-mile trek they were beaten, abused, spat upon, and starved.

My mother was everything to me. She was young, beautiful, feminine, with large brown eyes—and she was my mother. They took my father much earlier, first in 1940 for forced labor, and again in 1942 when he was sent to a “Punishment Company” that meant no return. The men who were in charge of the Jewish “work servicemen” were told that they would get a leave from the Army as soon as they manage to “de-Jew” their units, i.e., murder all the people under their command.

When this became clear to her, my mother went to see Ferenc Herczeg. He was the most famous official writer of Admiral Horthy’s regime. My father worked in the Great Writer’s print shop and set all his novels and magazines by hand. The Great Writer liked my father; he autographed all his novels to “Mr. Szilágyi, the master of letters.” He agreed to see my mother, who begged him to save her husband. The Great Writer looked at her in disbelief: “Madam, but your husband is a Jew!”

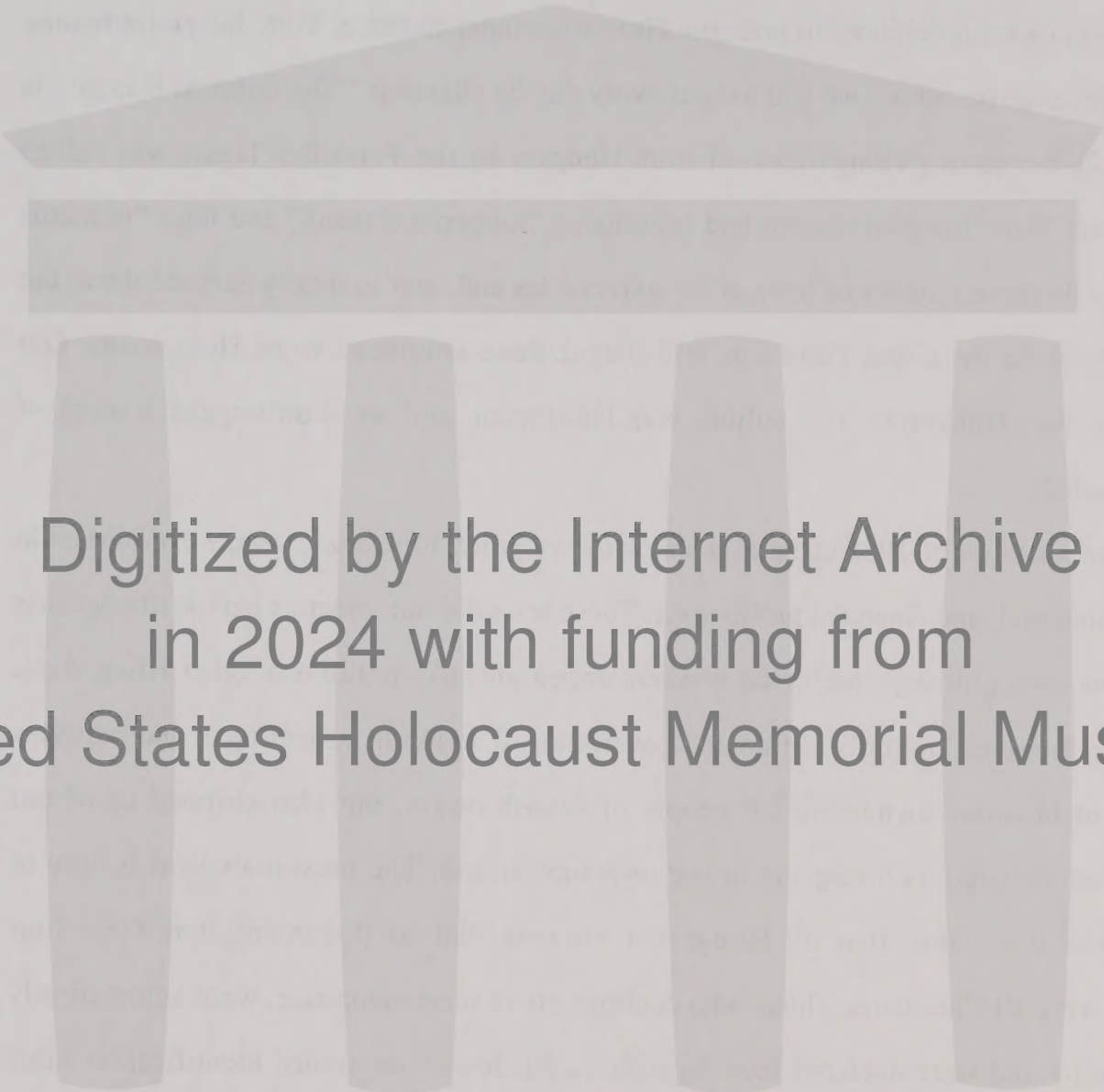
I will never forget the night my father had to go. After he left, I lay in bed close to my mother and couldn’t sleep. I watched her breathing: “Oh, God, I’m only six years old, at least keep my mother with me!” Six months later the wives of all “work servicemen” from my father’s

unit received official notification: “Your husband has disappeared during military action.” The good soldiers managed to completely “de-Jew” their units—they had earned a vacation.

Nobody could have imagined that such a thing could happen in Hungary. We trusted the Admiral. True, he came to power in 1919 as a result of a bloody coup, but those were difficult times. True, he bragged that he had been a fascist well before Hitler and Mussolini, but he had to appease the two powerful dictators to preserve Hungarian independence. True, his entire regime was based on revenge (in school we had to start every day by chanting: “The crippled Hungary is not a country!”), but cutting Hungarians off from Hungary by the Versailles Treaty was indeed cruel and stupid. True, his government had introduced “*numerus clausus*” and later “*numerus nullus*,” first to limit the number of Jews at the universities and later to totally exclude them, but the openly fascist Arrow Cross Party was still illegal. Jews continued to be Hungarians. Our mother tongue was Hungarian, our culture was Hungarian, and we didn’t speak a word of Hebrew or Yiddish.

The Jewish Laws of 1938 came as a shock to everyone. First, quotas were established in intellectual, industrial, and financial professions. These laws did not affect us personally because all my relatives were ordinary blue-collar workers or peasants like millions of other Hungarians. The next laws, however, not only eliminated governmental, cultural, educational, and judiciary employment or business ownership for people of Jewish origin, but also stripped us of our citizenship, and declared us foreigners in our own motherland. The most diabolical feature of these laws was the clause that *all* Hungarian citizens had to document that their four grandparents were all Christians. Those who couldn’t prove their innocence, were automatically considered guilty and were declared Jews by default. All Jews were issued identification cards with huge letters ZS on the front page that stood for “*zsidó*” (Jew in Hungarian).

Some tried to avoid the impending catastrophe by abandoning their ancestors’ religion. Thousands stood in line in front of Catholic and Protestant churches, waiting to be baptized. Although we had never been very religious—we observed only Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Hanukkah and Seder—my parents never considered this option, although when Jewish men were



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taken to the front as “work servicemen,” baptized Jews were given white armbands to distinguish them from ordinary Jews marked with yellow armbands. People with yellow armbands were the first victims of sadistic soldiers who could abuse and murder them at will. One of those soldiers became infamous for having the “work servicemen” strip naked in negative 40-degree weather, pouring water over them, and forcing them at gun point to climb trees and shout “cock-a-doodle-doo” until they froze to death. My father and a dozen of my close relatives paid with their lives under similar circumstances for being born Jewish.

I went to school in 1942. The fathers of most of my classmates were on the Russian front fighting “the Judeo-Bolshevik enemy.” There were several Jewish boys in the class. Of course, we were the scapegoats for all of this. We were regularly beaten, spat upon, and verbally abused by our six-year old classmates. They were otherwise normal kids, but it was so much fun to show the yids their place! We all spent our nights in shelters because the “Anglo-Saxons”¹ relentlessly bombarded Budapest’s residential areas to break the spirits of the civilian population. The carpet bombings certainly succeeded in terrifying children—Christians and Jews alike.

On March 19, 1944, the Germans formally occupied Hungary. Their first—and seemingly most important—task was to eliminate the Jews. They immediately sent Adolf Eichmann to Hungary, and established a puppet government with a special secretary for the “solution of the Jewish problem.” They ordered all Jews to wear yellow stars on their clothes. At this point we became prey to anyone. We were treated like rats. It is very painful to remember how eagerly the Hungarian people cooperated with the Germans in rounding up all the Jews who lived outside Budapest, concentrating them first in ghettos, then packing them into boxcars designed to transport cattle (a hundred people in each car without food or water), and taking them to Auschwitz. Altogether, about 600,000 Hungarian Jews perished, including dozens of my relatives.

I remember my relatives very well; we used to spend our summer vacations together. Most of them lived in two villages in southern Hungary. My grandmother’s brothers were

¹The term used by the Hungarian press for the Allies.

of terror that no human being can possibly imagine. The well-organized terror machine of the Gestapo was a maiden's dream compared to the Arrow Cross Party's raging mob.

The Arrow Cross Party's rank and file were mostly twelve to sixteen-year old boys who were given guns and told to destroy, murder, and torture anyone at will. They started their reign by announcing that anyone who dared to attempt the slightest disobedience would be hacked to pieces³ on the spot. Of course, they vowed to continue the war as the last vassals of the Nazis, and to exterminate the Jews from the sacred soil of Hungary. The "Brothers" decided to deport as many of the remaining Jews from Budapest as they could to the death camps, but they must have realized as the Red Army was approaching the capital, that they had to find a solution within the city. They decided to designate a ghetto in the middle of the city and eliminate the leftover Jewish population right there.

My teeth chattered in horror. That night I begged my mother: "Please, please, mommy, tuck me into bed and stay with me. Please, do not go to sleep. I'm so scared!"

They came to take my mother a few days later. She just looked at me with her beautiful big eyes ... and went away. I couldn't even cry.

My grandfather and I were now alone. My grandfather was a respected man. He used to work for the Hungarian State Railroads, but as a young man he was an elementary school teacher. My grandmother died early, and my grandfather raised his four children alone. His youngest son was lucky to die of pneumonia at the age of sixteen in 1939, but his other two sons, and now his daughter, were taken away from him by force. He couldn't cope with all this. He was a broken man, a mere shadow of his former self. But he still had to take care of me, and this gave him some strength.

The "Brothers" came for us on the 27th of November. First they ordered us to collect all our belongings, except glassware and furniture, and throw everything down from the staircase onto the inner courtyard of the house. There we were, running at gun point under the watchful eyes of the "Brothers," taking everything we still had and throwing it down to the ground.

³This is the literal translation of the ancient Hungarian word *felkoncoltatik*.

allowed to enter public parks, and could use only the back coaches of the streetcars. We continued to spend our nights in the underground shelter, scared to death of the carpet bombings.

My hair grew too long, and I badly needed a haircut. We knew the nearby barber quite well; he had always cut my hair, and used to greet my mother with a great smile: "Let me kiss your hand, Madame Szilágyi!" This time he was a different man. When I entered his shop, he started to yell: "Filthy little yid, haven't you learned your Kol Nidre yet? Get out of here before I tear your long ears off!"

Time went by. One evening, on the 15th of October, the radio suddenly stopped its regular programming. "We shall now broadcast the special proclamation of our Regent, Admiral Miklós Horthy of Nagybánya," said the announcer. We all froze in awe; we knew history was being made at that moment. In his proclamation the Admiral declared that Germany was losing the war and he had decided to break with Hitler and join the allies to finish the war as soon as possible. We were sitting in front of the radio, hardly believing what we were hearing. Then suddenly, the joy of freedom overwhelmed us, and we started to remove the yellow stars from our clothes. "Wait," said my grandfather, "it's not over yet." Unfortunately, as always, he was right.

A couple of hours later the radio broadcast a new announcement. The Admiral was deposed by the Germans, taken into custody² and the Arrow Cross Party took over the leadership of the country. This was the most terrible thing that could possibly happen to Hungary, and especially to us. The Arrow Cross Party was a bunch of failed people. Their leader, Ferenc Szálasi, was a failed army officer who later also failed as a journalist. Their second-in-command made his living as a corn-cutter because he failed in everything else. These people called each other "Brothers" (Szálasi's official title was "Brother Nation-Leader & Party-Leader"), but they only knew how to do one thing: to hate. They hated everyone who was successful; they hated everyone who had something; they hated everyone who was able to accomplish a goal. Their only goal was to revenge their own failures. Now their time had come. They established a regime

²He died in exile in 1956. His remains were re-buried in Hungary in September 1993.

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Blankets, carpets, skirts, stamp collections, letters, documents, ties, underwear, hats, birdcages, shoes were flying down from all floors of the four-story building, making a terrible noise as they hit the ground. There was a high wall between the inner courtyard of our house and that of the next. As the other house was not a yellow-star house, its caretaker—not willing to miss the show—peeked atop a long ladder and enjoyed herself watching our misery, and making obscene comments from the top of the wall.

The “Brothers” were supposed to decide whom to take to the brick factory, and whom to take to the ghetto. It seemed obvious to everyone that the ghetto was a better choice: we thought that it was only a matter of days before the Red Army would enter Budapest and save our lives. The brick factory meant a death walk to the gas chamber at a remote concentration camp far from the front. Therefore, when my grandfather and I were both ordered to stand with the group designated for the brick factory, we knew that our days were numbered. A little discussion among the “Brothers,” however, occurred: the brick factory was far away and none of them wanted to go there. After some ten minutes of quarreling, the chief “Brother” announced his decision: “We’ll take the whole rabble of filthy yids to the ghetto.”

We were allowed to take as much as we could carry. All our belongings that we had previously thrown down were taken away in a big truck, and we never saw them again. We were ordered to form a double line and walk toward the inner city. We joined groups of Jews from other yellow-star houses who were also marched in the same direction. Finally, the small streams formed a big river of people all marching toward the ghetto. As we marched, the “Brothers” yelled at us, kicked us, spat at us, and shot randomly into the crowd. They immensely enjoyed being the unquestioned masters of so many innocent people (as it turned out later, approximately 80,000 people were taken to the ghetto that day). The people on the street looked at us, laughed, and made rude comments as, e.g., “Look how upset the stinking yids are,” and “Finally they’ll find the place where they belong.” I did not see a single sympathetic or concerned face in the crowd.

One old man from our house had terminal cancer, and could not walk any longer. They shot him a couple of feet from me, and kicked his body aside. His wife tried to stay with him, but they forced her back into the marching column. As we approached the inner city, the shootings became increasingly frequent. Finally, we were walking in a thick mess of blood. "What is this under our feet?" I asked my grandfather. "Oil," he answered after some hesitation.

It was late afternoon when we arrived at a big square named Klauzál tér. The square was full of Jews. We were surrounded by the Arrow Cross "Brothers," who by now had lost every trace of humanity that they might have left. "Brother, don't you see how difficult it is for this Jewish woman to carry her bag?" asked one of them. "Indeed," replied the other, "I must help her!" And he shot the Jewish woman twice in the head. Another came to an old man and said: "Why do you carry your bag? Don't you understand that you won't need anything in a very short time?"

As if to confirm this statement, the loudspeaker announced: "At this time you are ordered to drop into the designated containers all money, jewelry, watches, and any other valuable items you might have. You will be searched afterwards. If any valuables are found on you, you will be hacked to pieces on the spot." My grandfather went to one of the containers and dropped all his money and valuables into it ... except for one thing. He carried my grandmother's old golden pocket watch, his only tangible memory from his deceased wife. The watch was a masterpiece. My grandmother received it from her grandmother as a wedding present in 1909. I saw that my grandfather "forgot" about the watch and whispered into his ear not to risk his life, but he had evidently made up his mind.

My blood froze when I saw an Arrow Cross "Brother" approaching my grandfather. He was about 14 years old, with an automatic weapon in his hand. The lust for blood was evident in his colorless eyes. I wanted to ask him, "How many people have you killed today?" but I was too scared to open my mouth. He searched my grandfather and immediately found the watch. He took him aside to shoot him. I was crying desperately and praying for my grandfather's life. Then something unexpected happened. The young lad evidently recognized that the watch was

valuable, and changed his mind. “You will be hacked to pieces on the spot!” he hissed at my grandfather, and dropped the watch into his own pocket as he walked away.

It was already late evening when we arrived at the ghetto. It was a relatively small area of the inner city, previously inhabited mostly by Jews. The Arrow Cross Party ordered all non-Jewish tenants out of their homes with the promise that after the yids were taken care of, they could return and would be rewarded. Several hundred of us were distributed to each building. Inside the house, we were divided into apartments. The apartment we were ordered into formerly belonged to a religious Jewish family. There was nothing left in it except for furniture, glassware, and some old photographs. Twenty-one of us had to sleep in each room. Of course, there were only a couple of beds in the room and no sheets. We lay down on the floor, exhausted, depressed, and without hope. Nobody slept that night.

An old woman brought an alarm clock with her. She put it on the table. I was lying on the floor, close to my grandfather, quietly sobbing, and listening to the indifferent sound of the alarm clock: tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. I was thinking to myself: “The Arrow Cross brought us here to murder us; that is clear. They took my father, my mother, and now they want us. They want to kill us all. But they can’t kill me! I’m *me*, I can’t be killed! After all, they are also human beings. They eat like me, they pee like me. They can’t kill me!”

I was certainly wrong in assuming that they ate like me. The fact was that there was nothing for us to eat. They didn’t bring us there to feed. The only source of food was that organized by the so-called Jewish Council, that tried to take care of the internal matters of the ghetto. They were somehow able to smuggle some food in; occasionally, they could give some soup to the children. I remember once policemen came in and demanded food. The caretaker showed them the loaf of bread he had for the entire house: an ounce for each child and nothing for adults. The good policemen turned around in shame and left. (Most of the regular police were not members of the Arrow Cross Party).

There was a curfew in effect, except for two hours a day. Of course, there were no shops—we had no money anyway—, movies, or functioning synagogues. We just strolled the

streets during those two hours, hungry, in despair, without hope, without purpose. The Arrow Cross gang patrolled the streets with loaded automatic weapons, occasionally firing a few rounds into the crowd, and enjoying the screams of the dying. At night they selected a house, ambushed it, and killed everybody. The public bath and the synagogue were soon filled with dead bodies. My grandfather was convinced that he would find the bodies of his children there. He went to search for them every day, and came home in despair.

The shootings were not the only source of death, however. Many people committed suicide, climbing to higher floors and jumping off. I saw their deformed bodies virtually every morning on the ground floor. The most frequent cause of death was starvation. After December 10, when the gates of the ghetto were sealed, there was no more food from the outside. Then dying of hunger became a commonplace event. It started with diarrhea, and mental disorder followed. In their final days the victims talked only about food. They died imagining themselves sitting in a fashionable café in sunlit pre-war Budapest and eating the best strudels of Central Europe.

Some people managed to survive. How they got their food, I have no idea. A good old lady, for example, found waxed paper used for holding butter. The paper still had traces of butter on it, and she brought it to me: "Lick it, little Miki, it is nutritious," she said. On one occasion, another woman made an offer to me: if I brought a pan down to the underground shelter from the room where she lived, I would get a pancake. I was too hungry to resist and bravely climbed out of the shelter. Up I went to the third floor. I found the pan and tried to return but the staircase was gone: a Russian bomb had taken care of it while I was looking for the pan. I had to climb the ruins back to the shelter.

The "Anglo-Saxon" bombs were replaced by Russian ones. As the front was approaching Budapest, the Arrow Cross Party decided to seal the ghetto off. Before the gates were closed, they allowed the non-Jewish former inhabitants to visit for the last time. I then experienced a most unexpected encounter. I had already witnessed people being shot and dying of hunger, but the following little conversation surpassed everything. It remains vivid to this day. It took place

between the former janitor of the house and my grandfather. The middle-aged woman suddenly burst into tears, and became hysterical. My grandfather tried to comfort her, but she was desperate. She said: "They have ruined my life! Don't you understand, they will blow you up, and *I'll lose all my furniture!*"

Our life was additionally burdened by rumors spreading at the speed of light. Most of them were true. For example, we knew about the fate of the "privileged" Jews who lived in specially marked houses near the Danube. They were rich enough to buy "safe passes" issued by the Consulates of Sweden, Switzerland, and the Vatican. The basic content of these passes was a statement that the person who carried it was under the protection of the issuing government. The Arrow Cross Party considered these people "traitors to the Hungarian fatherland," and treated them accordingly. They marched them to the bank of the Danube, tied them together in groups of three, shot the person in the middle, then pushed them into the river. This method was invented "to save bullets for fighting the Bolsheviks."

After a rumor was spread that everybody over 60 will be shot, my grandfather got a strange idea. He declared that he would walk out of the ghetto and visit the Pension Office of the Hungarian Railroads to complain that they'd failed to deliver his pension for the past two months. I remembered the incident of my grandmother's watch too well; I tried to persuade my grandfather that this was equivalent to suicide, but, again, he had already made up his mind. It was a cold morning; he put on his warm coat and fur hat and walked towards the gate. I followed him crying. "You, lousy old yid, where do you think you are going?" asked the Arrow Cross guard at the gate. "I am going to get my pension," said my grandfather. The guard burst into laughter: "Did you hear the old yid, Brothers? He's gonna get his pension!" With this, he raised his rifle high in the air and crashed down on my grandfather's head with the stock of the rifle, using all his strength. The old man's body spun around several times before falling down. I tried to drag him back as fast as I could. I pulled him inside a house. People came to help, and it turned out that God saved him a second time: the fur hat took most of the blow, and he escaped with bruises and a temporary loss of consciousness.

On Christmas Eve the ring was closed around the city. The siege of Budapest began. The whistles of bombs and shells became the music of the day: they brought destruction and fear, but also the hope that the end of our sufferings was near. Now we permanently moved underground. The cellar was overcrowded, there was absolutely nothing to eat, and water was scarce. People were dying like flies, and soon everyone was covered with lice.

It was forbidden to practice our religion “by penalty of dismemberment.” Nevertheless, when the time of Hanukkah came, an old rabbi climbed through the underground cellars from house to house and delivered the holiday service. We were sitting there, starving, lousy Jews and when he cried out “Yevareheho Adonai eleiho,” the whole shelter became a monolithic sobbing mass of doomed people who were finally at peace with themselves and ready to die.

Many of us did die. I will never forget the eyes of the middle-aged lady who died of hunger one day before the liberation of the ghetto. Then I was already delirious; I’d eaten absolutely nothing for the last nine days. And the next morning, on the 18th of January, 1945, the Russians were suddenly there. No more Arrow Cross, no more Germans, just tired, dirty, and drunken Russian soldiers who smiled at us and tore the yellow stars off our clothes.

And they gave us food. A truck came with bread, and a huge crowd of starving people surrounded it immediately. A Russian soldier stood on top of the truck, and threw loaves of bread into the crowd. People trampled each other to death for the bread. One man lost his eye to the crazed crowd. My grandfather came back, barely alive, with two loaves of fresh bread wrapped in his old white scarf, which was covered with lice.

Then people started to eat. They ate like animals, stuffing the fresh bread into their mouths, swallowing it without chewing, filling their empty stomachs. Many of them paid with their lives for their hunger reflex: their exhausted intestines couldn’t deal with so much food in such a short time, and they died of diarrhea. Fortunately, my grandfather knew this: he cut one piece of bread for me and one for himself. I happily ate the bread and was grateful to God that I was alive.

I only learned many years later that my life was saved by a brave young Swedish diplomat, Raul Wallenberg, who had previously saved the lives of thousands of other Hungarian Jews. He visited the SS general who was in charge of pulling the trigger to blow up the mines placed under the houses of the ghetto. He said to the general: "If you'll perform this cowardly act, I'll personally see to it that you'll hang after the war is over." The general decided to surrender the ghetto without blowing it up. Wallenberg, however, paid with his life for his bravery; he died in the Gulag as a prisoner of Communism.

At about 10 o'clock in the morning my grandfather told me: "Although we are both very weak, we must leave this place immediately." We left and headed home. The one-mile walk took us the whole day. There were no streets, just ruins. The bodies of dead people and dead horses covered the whole city. But the war was far from over. The Germans still held Buda (the hilly part of the city on the western side of the Danube), and they were shooting over the river with their artillery. One of my grandfather's sisters and her daughter were killed several days later by these shells.

Finally, we arrived home. Our neighbors greeted us as if we were just back from a short vacation. No apologies, no shame, nothing. They gave us some food, however, and we climbed the stairs to find our apartment empty. There was some furniture left but no clothes and no windows and it was a very cold winter. My grandfather found some blankets and some paper to light fire in the stove. We went down to the street and brought a couple of bricks to heat up and keep us warm for the night.

The next day we found out that not all of our problems had been solved by staying alive. The Russians did not come to save the lives of the Jews (although they did save ours!) but to establish their empire. Accordingly, they were seeking men to take them "for a little work" that meant a dozen years in the Gulag. The Arrow Cross brothers quickly understood how to avoid this and use the new opportunities at the same time. The other side of their armbands happened to be red, so they turned the bands inside out and immediately became activists of the newly formed Hungarian Communist Party.

There were still no utilities and little food in the city. Although surrounded by the Red Army, the Germans continued to hold Buda for almost a month. They even managed to push the front back, and almost took the whole capital again. They mercilessly destroyed this beautiful city, “the pearl of the Danube,” and blew up all of our bridges when they retreated to Buda.

We had no money; nothing. My grandfather found two small tin bowls and two canteens, took me by the hand, and we went around panhandling. Wherever we found a place where some food was being sold, the old man swallowed his pride and begged: “Please, give something to this child.” And they did. Sometimes they even gave my grandfather something to eat, but he always shared his part with me.

As my grandfather’s health began to deteriorate, we both came to the conclusion that I could not remain with him much longer. There was a new organization called National Salvation that had a program to take the hungry children of Budapest to the villages and have them work there for food. So, I bid farewell to my grandfather and went to Orosháza, a small town approximately 150 miles southeast of Budapest. The peasants already knew about our arrival and were eagerly looking forward to the free labor force. Since I was so skinny—all my bones could be seen through my skin—nobody wanted to take me. Finally, the officials of the National Salvation virtually forced an old, poor, and blind couple to take me in. They reluctantly agreed on the condition that I help them all the time, and not attend school.

It was already March and I hadn’t been to school since the previous summer. I was thirsty for knowledge, and couldn’t accept that condition. A couple of days later I escaped. I was nine years old and alone in the world. But this is another story.

